

# In Sardinia, Sea, Ancient Stones ...

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WHEN God made the world, says a Sardinian legend, He gathered up all the leftover bits of dirt, hurled them down and stamped His foot on them. Thus He created Sardinia. The story is evidently multicultural, since the Greeks called Sardinia "Ichnoussa," meaning footprint. This was both descriptive -- according to what passed then for cartography, and because it was a steppingstone in the sea -- and prophetic. Stepped on for millennia, Sardinia is still underrated. Italians generally think of only one thing in connection with Sardinia: summer vacation. And most non-Italians think of only two, bandits and the glamorous resort area called the Costa Smeralda, one undesirable, the other expensive. But the first is not a problem and the second is not the only destination on Sardinia.

The island has all the requisites of paradise: ancient mysteries, a spectacular coastline, rugged mountains, great beaches with clean water, birds and animals, fragrant herbs, full-bodied red wines and refreshing light whites, suckling pig, bottarga (the pressed and dried roe of gray mullet), lobster, few people (and those few quite discreet), archeology galore, human-scale museums and plenty of folklore. It is also conveniently situated in the geographic center of the Mediterranean, less than an hour's flight from Rome.

Although Sardinia is only 166 miles from top to bottom, the topography and ethos do not invite whirlwind tours of its high points, the way one can circumnavigate Sicily in a week (if one must), leaping from one spectacular Greek temple to another. The best way to see the island is in a leisurely way, a chunk at a time, soaking up atmosphere as much as actually doing or seeing anything.

For a long weekend in June, my companion and I chose a chunk on the west coast: a loop from the port town of Alghero in the northwest, down the coast to the city of Oristano in about the middle, then back north by a slightly inland route, a total of 170 miles. If I were to follow my own advice, I'd subdivide even that chunk into smaller ones, to spend more time looking out to sea, stopping to snorkel among the fish off the rocky coast or listening to a cuckoo in the wooded hills.

The appeal of this particular piece of Sardinia, which is also relatively less resort-oriented and more Sardinian than the north and east coasts, lies in its combination of breathtaking natural beauty and ancient remains that tell stories one does not hear from the stones of the Italian mainland or Sicily.

By about 6000 B.C. the Sardinians, probably the same people who had been painting caves in paleolithic Liguria and Provence, had arrived over a land bridge from Corsica. The neolithic culture that developed was agro-pastoral (farming and sheep), but thanks to obsidian, the volcanic glass used to make sharp weapons and utensils, and other minerals, also did very well in trade. As a result the Sardinians had plenty of contact with other neolithic and later Bronze Age peoples.

By 1500 B.C. they were building odd massive towers of granite or trachite, most often conical and about 40 feet in diameter and about 50 to 65 feet high, that are still the most frequently encountered man-made feature of the entire Sardinian landscape -- hills, dales, coast and hinterland. They are

called nuraghi, and embody -- both in the popular imagination and on cork souvenirs -- the strong and independent spirit that has always characterized Sardinia. It has never considered itself Italian, and the nuraghi are there to prove it.

They were used, and reused, until the Roman conquest in 238 B.C. and even later. None is preserved completely, but small model nuraghi are preserved and show that the top was probably a protruding battlement. Experts can identify remains of parts of about 7,000. Spotting ruined nuraghi is a fascinating aspect of driving across the Sardinian countryside and along the coasts. Our first of this trip was positioned like a watchtower over the famously beautiful coast road south of Alghero. The advanced version of the game is spotting stones recycled from ruined nuraghi into enclosures for olive trees and sheep.

Some nuraghi, however, maintain their imposing majesty. One such is Nuraghe Losa, northeast of Oristano, near Abbasanta, the first of the great nuraghi to be excavated, in 1891. With some surrounding structures and an enclosing wall, it gives a reasonable idea of the function of the towers. Theories ranging from tombs to air-traffic control towers have given way to the prevailing opinion that they were like medieval castles, offering a defensive stronghold. The nuraghe was probably the residence of a chieftain, a shepherd-king, and around it grew up villages, cult places and cemeteries. Nuraghe Losa is roughly triangular, with a central tower about three stories high with niches (one with sleeping bat hanging upside down) surrounded by three lobes. You can climb up what passes for a staircase between two thick walls.

A few miles away is the so-called nuragic complex of Santa Cristina -- a sort of park around a rustic church with scattered ruins and plenty of spots for a picnic -- whose showpiece is a fine, though heavily restored, example of the sacred well, another type of stone monument of prehistoric Sardinia, strikingly similar to monuments of Mycenaean Greece with its pointed dome and entrance corridor containing a staircase down to where water still flows.

The ancient world's most formidable navigators, the Phoenicians, were the first outsiders to make permanent settlements on Sardinia, starting in the eighth century B.C. Their main port was at Tharros, just outside of Oristano, on the Sinis Peninsula, which encloses the Gulf of Oristano. The promontory was easy to defend; its stone provided building materials; it enjoyed good winds, and it was well positioned for travel to and from not only inland Sardinia but also Spain, Marseilles, Africa, Greece and Etruria.

Relations between the nuragic peoples and the Phoenicians were peaceful: the Sardinians traded their valuable minerals for pretty glass beads and gradually withdrew to the interior, while the commercial superpower set up shop on the coast.

MUCH of what is visible today, and certainly most of what is most easily readable on the large and somewhat confusing site, where excavations are still in progress, is a Roman city, with houses, temples, baths and streets -- a result of Roman building over and improvement of the Punic city in the third century B.C. The *Cardo Maximus* (the main north-south street), with an open drain running down its middle (now conveniently covered with wooden planks), is a particularly fine example of a Roman city street of A.D. 200. Here one can see Rome from the point of view of the vanquished, as the finally victorious power that obliterated civilizations it did not acknowledge as such.

The two poles of our little trip were the very different towns of Alghero and Oristano. Alghero is a fishing port, which had been fortified in the 11th century by the Doria family of Genoa, and spent its formative centuries under the heel of Catalonia, which occupied it in the 14th century. A

presumably Catalanian flavor remains in the winding streets of the old center of Alghero, which, with its 16th-century Spanish ramparts and towers, is one of the best-preserved and most charming towns on the island. On the opposite side of the Gulf of Alghero, and dominating it, is the dramatic promontory of Capo Caccia, populated by many species of birds. Carved by nature into its nether regions is the Grotta di Nettuno (Cave of Neptune), an enormous cave of great beauty, with catwalks, stalagmites and stalactites and formations with silly names. On a previous trip we had reached Capo Caccia by car, and descended about 650 stone steps to the cave. Sane people take a nice boat from Alghero.

The first half of the drive to Oristano is by an excruciatingly photogenic coast road sandwiched between rocky coast and mountains, as far as the pretty town of Bosa. We saw sailboats, sandy coves, *macchia mediterranea* splotched with shades of red and green, placid cows taking their bovine ease on the shore and a falcon soaring over a green gorge. We also saw some donkeys. My feeling that they were too well groomed by half to be beasts of burden was correct: I later learned that "asinello" is often served for dinner.

THE second half of the route is at sea level and less spectacular; the topography becomes less rocky and more sandy, ending with the lagoons and salt flats of the Sinis peninsula. Here we argued about whether we should be seeing pink flamingos -- migratory ones, not hallucinatory. We were told later that we should have.

Oristano is just over a thousand years old, founded in 1070 and capital of the *giudicato*, or kingdom, of Arborea. A nondescript modern periphery has taken the place of the medieval walls, but the well-kept center fairly gleams with restored Baroque houses and palaces and the beautiful, if much rebuilt, cathedral (begun in the 12th century and containing some interesting Pisan Romanesque sculpture). Oristano was defended in the 14th century against the Catalonians just to the north by Eleonora d'Arborea, an impressive enough historical figure who was raised to legendary status by the *Risorgimento*, and whose image is much in evidence.

Installed in the Palazzo Parpaglia, the friendly Antiquarium Arborense contains a sampling of artifacts from the various ancient peoples who occupied the area; unfortunately, the best material has been stolen, and the best finds from Tharros are in London.

Ancient Greek authors derived the word sardonic from the name of a poisonous Sardinian plant that distorts the face. The surviving pride of the Arborense collection is a terra cotta Phoenician mask, the mouth drawn up in, well -- a sardonic grin at us, visitors who were returning to his hated Rome.

Rooms and attractions along the island's coast

## Getting There

There are frequent flights between major Italian cities and Sardinia's main airports at Alghero, Cagliari and Olbia, as well as frequent car ferries. Do not even think of going to Sardinia in July and August unless you love crowds. But the island is empty at other times (and some hotels and restaurants close in winter), and the off season is a good time to explore the towns and interior. Oristano holds one of Italy's most impressive traditional Carnival festivals, the *Sartiglia*, featuring a horse race with masked riders in medieval costumes.

## Where to Stay

ALGHERO : Villa Las Tronas, 1 Lungomare Valencia, 10141 Alghero (SS) Italy; telephone (39-79) 981818, fax (29-79) 981044. A double room is \$193 (calculated at 1,453 lire to the dollar), including breakfast in high season, and \$144 the rest of the year. It is the only hotel in Alghero with any architectural interest (it was a turn-of-the-century villa of the Savoia family) or particular charm. The 29-room hotel, with a pool and sea bathing, occupies a small promontory 10 minutes' walk from town.

Hotel El Faro, 10141 Porto Conte, 07041 Alghero (SS); (39-79) 942010, fax (39-79) 942030. Double rooms \$151 to \$248. A sprawling, attractive 1960's-vintage seaside hotel, with 90 rooms, opposite Capo Caccia.

ORISTANO: We stayed at the modern, functional and fairly central 132-room Mistral Due, Via XX Settembre, 09170 Oristano; (39-783) 210389, fax (39-783) 211000. A double is \$99.

An alternative near the beach is Hotel Del Sole Torre Grande, 54 Via Duca degli Abruzzi, Marina di Torre Grande, 09170 Oristano, (39-783) 22000, fax (39-783) 22217. A double with breakfast is \$94 in July and August, \$77 other times; closed November through January.

### Sightseeing

For tourism information, contact Azienda Autonoma di Soggiorno e Turismo, Piazza Porta Terra, 9 07041 Alghero (Sassari); (39-79) 979054, fax (39-79) 974881.

Antiquarium Arborense museum, Palazzo Parpaglia, 37 Via Parpaglia; (39-783) 74433. In summer, open Monday to Friday 9:30 A.M. to 1 P.M. and 5:30 to 8 P.M. Closed in the morning on weekends. Afternoon hours are 4:30 to 7 P.M. the rest of the year. Admission is \$2.75, including a guided tour of the museum and the historic center of town.

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